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AUTHOR Feng, Jianhua
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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews theories of play and discusses the relationship between children's play and social development. The paper begins with a discussion of an educator's concern that young children in modern China have decreased the amount of their play due to pressure from the family to acquire academic skills. The review of major theories of play addresses theories developed before World War I, which are termed classical, and those developed after the war, termed modern. Five descriptive characteristics of play viewed as critical to the definition of play are listed. The research reviewed indicates that training in group dramatic play can result in gains in social skills and perspective-taking. But research findings leave unanswered questions about which aspects of play are primarily responsible for developmental gains. Implications of the research for early childhood education are pointed out. These concern the provision of an environment conducive to play and the use of play tutoring to promote social play. Directions for future research are suggested. (RH)

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PLAY AND ITS ROLE IN THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN

JIANHUA FENG

Department of Curriculum & Instruction

College of Education

Memphis State University

Memphis, TN 38152

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ABSTRACT

This position paper reviews main theories of play and discusses the relationship between children's play and the social development of young children, and also suggests its implication for early childhood education. It is believed that play has a key role in children's social development by providing a context in which children acquire social skills and social knowledge. It is suggested that adults should provide a conducive environment to promote children's social development through play.

Play and Its Role in the Social Development of Young Children

Introduction

Once in a binational conference on play, a professor made the following statement, "Children in China do not play". This shocking statement provoked lots of questions immediately. Do children play? Why do children play? Why do not children in China play? What the hell is play? What can we do to encourage play? Is play Educational or nonessential?...

In part, the professor told us the truth that children in China play much less than they used to. They are under tremendous pressures from parents, peers, society, and other sources. They have to sacrifice their play for early schooling, for academical achievement, and they have to do something more "educational" to please adults. They are children by nature and in nature, but they are becoming children without enjoyable childhood due to the increasingly demanding society. Our children are robbed of rights to play.

So much attention is paid to schooling and so much stress is put on cognitive development that it is forgotten that play is children's work and nature for children, and that children as human beings are social animals. As children grow, they develop socially as well as physically and cognitively. In the course of development, children go through two major process simultaneously: individualization and socialization (Denzin, 1977). Each child acquires a more or less consistent personality structure, and also gradually becomes functioning member of the society.

As children mature, one of their major tasks is to acquire social skills and social knowledge that will enable them to function successfully in society. The socialization process occupies much of children's and their

care-giver's energy during the preschool years. During the period, children learn skills such as sharing, helping, and cooperation that enable them to get along with other people. They develop the ability to solve social problems and learn how to inhibit aggressive and impulsive behavior. These social skills require the ability to understand other people's thoughts and emotions and to see things from other's perspectives.

Play is a major activity of childhood. It is intricately involved in the socialization process. There is a two-way relationship between play and social development (Johnson, 1987). The social environment has important influence on children's play. Children learn attitudes and skills needed for play from their parents and other children. Parents and peers also encourage certain types of play behavior and discourage others. At the same time, play acts as an important context in which children acquire social skills and social knowledge. This paper is basically focused on play's role in the social development of preschool children.

Theoretical Considerations on Play

To understand play's role in children's social development, it is critical to have a good understanding about why children play and what play is. This section reviews some major theories about play and explore the definition of play.

Theories of Play

Children's play has long occupied the interests of sociologists, social psychologists, and educators. Many researchers and theories have been concerned with the questions: what is play? why do people, and children in particular, play? what are consequences of play? Contributed to many scholars from different perspectives, there are some different theories on play attempting to explain what play is and what causes it. According to

Elis (1973), they could basically be grouped as classical theories and modern theories.

(1) Classical Theories

Classical theories of play all originated before World War I. They try to explain why play exists and what purpose it serves. They are basically :armchair" theories based more on philosophical reflection than on experimental research. Classical theories include surplus energy theory and recreation theory which view play as a means of energy regulation, and recapitulation and practice theories explaining play in terms of instincts.

According to surplus energy theory, each living thing generates a certain amount of energy to meet survival needs. Any energy left over after these needs have been met becomes surplus energy. This extra energy builds up pressure and must be expended. Play, which is viewed as otherwise purposeless behavior, is how humans and animals get rid of this energy.

In direct opposition to the surplus energy theory, the recreation theory stated that the purpose of play is to restore energy expended in work. Work uses up energy and creates an energy deficit. This energy can regenerated either by sleeping or by engaging in an activity which is very different from the work that caused the energy deficit. Play, being the opposite of work, is the ideal way to restore energy.

Prior to the turn of the century, scientists discovered that as human embryo develops, it appears that it goes through some of the same stages that occurred in the evolution of the human species. G. Stanly Hall extended this recapitulation theory to children's play. According to Hall, children reenact the development stages of the human race in their play: animal, savage, tribal member and so on. Theses stages of play follow the

same order that they occurred in human evolution. Thus children climb trees before engaging in gang play. The purpose of play is to rid children of primitive instincts that are no longer needed in modern life.

Practice theory believes that, rather than eliminating instincts from the past, play serves to strengthen instincts needed for the future. Newly born humans and animals inherit a number of imperfect, partially formed instincts that are essential for survival. Play offers a safe means for the young of a species to practice and perfect theses vital skills. The purpose of play is to exercise and elaborate skills required for adult life.

All of the classical theories of play have serious weaknesses. They are very limited in scope and explain only a small segment of play behavior. There are numerous exceptions to each theory. The surplus energy theory offers no reason why children continue to play when exhausted. The recreation theory falsely predicts that, because adults work more, they should play more than children. The recapitulation theory cannot explain why children like to play with toys such as cars and spaceships, that reflect modern technology. All four theories are based on outdated, discredited beliefs about energy, instincts, and evolution. The surplus energy theory assumes that energy has hydraulic properties similar those of water, and the practice theory contends that children inherit a knowledge of which specific skills will be needed in adult life.

(2) Modern Theories

Modern theories of play attempt to do more than simply explain why it exists. They also try to determine play's role in child development and, in some cases, to specify antecedent conditions that cause play behavior (Elis, 1973). Primarily, there are three groups of modern theories. They

are psychoanalytic theory, cognitive theories, and arousal motivation theory.

Psychoanalytic theory believes that play has an important role in children's emotional development. According to Freud, play can have a cathartic effect, allowing children to rid themselves of negative feelings associated with traumatic events. Play allows the child to suspend reality and switch roles from being the passive recipient of a bad experience to being the one who gives out the experience. Erikson (1950) extended the psychoanalytic theory of play by examining its contribution to normal personality development. According to Erikson, play progresses through stages that mirror children's psychological development. Through play, children create model situations that help them master the demands of reality.

Cognitive theories take another perspective on play. Jean Piaget proposed a detailed theory of children's intellectual development. According to Piaget, children go through a series of different stages during which their thought processes become increasingly similar to those of adults. Children engage in the type of play that matches their level of cognitive development. Play reflects a child's level of cognitive development and also contributes to that development. Piaget views play as an imbalanced state in which assimilation dominates over accommodation. Children thus practice and consolidate recently acquired skills.

Arousal motivation theory contends that play is caused by a need or drive in our central nervous system to keep arousal at an optimal level. Play is a stimulation-producing activity caused by low levels of arousal. When there is too much stimulation, arousal increases to uncomfortably high levels and causes us to engage in stimulation-reducing activities.

Modern theories of play have increased our understanding of play both through the explanatory power of the theories themselves and through the research they have stimulated.

Definition of Play

Everyone knows that children's play is fun and exciting. But it is not easy at all to have a satisfactory definition of play. As Chance (1979) realized, play is like love; everybody knows what it is but nobody can define it. Some scholars have even considered the term undefinable and therefore not worth of serious study. Fortunately, the current increase in play research has led to progress in defining play. Certain descriptive characteristics of play are widely cited as critical to its definition.

(1). Play is pleasurable, enjoyable. Even when not actually accompanied by signs of mirth, it is still positive valued by the player.

(2). Play has no extrinsic goals. Its motivations are intrinsic and serve no other objectives. In fact, it is more an enjoyment of means than an effort devoted to some particular ends. In utilitarian terms, it is inherently unproductive.

(3). Play is spontaneous and voluntary. It is not obligatory but is freely chosen by the player.

(4). Play involves some active engagement on the part of the player.

(5). Play has certain systematic relations to what is not play. (Garvey, 1977).

In this paper, any activity with most of the above five characteristics is treated as play.

Play's Role in Social Development

By social development, it means two things. One is social skills, and another is social knowledge. Social skills are those skills that enable

children to get along with others, such as turn-taking, sharing, and cooperation, while social knowledge means the ability to take perspectives of others and understand other people's thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. Play has a key role in social development of young children by providing a context in which children can acquire many important social skills and social knowledge as well.

Studies by Garvey (1974) and others have provided detailed descriptions of the social abilities underlying group play. The most fundamental of theses is the ability to understand the rules of play. All social play is rule-governed. Even simple parent-infant games such as peek-a-boo require the establishment of the rule that participants take turns. In sociodramatic play, the rules become more complex. For example, once children adopt a role, their behavior must be consistent within that role. If their behavior becomes inappropriate, such as a baby acting like an adult, the other players will usually issue a sharp reprimand. Rules for play are not set in advance but are established by the players during the course of the play. Therefore, play is a context in which children learn about the meaning of rules in general.

Children must also be able to construct and vary the theme of the play activity together (Garvey, 1974). This joint planning ability is particularly important in sociodramatic play. To successfully engage in group dramatization, children must first agree on who will adopt each role and on the make-believe identities of objects and actions. For example, they might agree that Janice will be a doctor, Judy a nurse, and Joey a sick patient. It might then be decided that a pencil will be used as if it were a thermometer and a cylindrical block will be a syringe. They must also make cooperative decisions about the story sequence. This type of joint planning requires give-and-take and cooperation.

As Rubin (1980) has suggested this type of play is an "informal didactic

phenomenon that serves to strengthen already formed rule and role conceptualizations through consolidations and practice" (P73). Others have argued that the role-taking experiences that occur in pretend play also build empathic skills and hasten the reduction of egocentrism, the inability of children to focus flexibly on several aspects of social events or objects simitaneously (Piaget, 1970).

Descriptive studies have provided evidence that social play requires a number of abilities such as turn alternation and cooperation. These findings suggest that play may have a role in the acquisitions or consolidation of these social skills. This possibility has motivated researchers to investigate further the relationship between play and social competence.

Several investigators have reported significant correlation between levels of group dramatic play and measures of peer popularity and social skills (Conny & Doyle, 1984; Rubin & Huyvern, 1981). Children who frequently engaged in social dramatic play were rated as more popular by both teachers and peers. These children were also rated as more socially skilled by their teachers. In addition, the high-sociodramatic-play children exhibited more positive social actions toward peers. Parallel-constructive play has also been found to correlate significantly with peer popularity, teacher ratings of social competence, and a measure of social problem solving (Rubin, 1982).

Given the high social demand of group dramatic play, the relationship between this form of play and measures of social competence is hardly surprising. A high degree of social skill may be required for children to engage in this advanced form of play, group dramatic play may help children acquire these social abilities.

To investigate causal relationship between play and social competence, several researchers have conducted training studies in which children

were taught or encouraged by an adult to engage in sociodramatic play. Results showed that the training not only resulted in gains in group dramatic play but also led to increases in positive peer interaction and cooperation (Rosen, 1974; Smith, 1981; Udwin, 1983). These findings both indicate that play training enhances social development and support the position that engaging in group dramatic play promotes the acquisition of social skills.

According to social knowledge research in developmental psychology, social knowledge concerns the following areas of children's changing conceptions of the social perspective of others (Shantz, 1975).

1. Visual or perceptual perspective taking: how does another person see the world?

2. Cognitive perspective taking: what are other people thinking? what are other people like?

3. Affective perspective taking: what kind of emotional experiences is another person having? This is frequently referred to as empathy.

Research has shown the role of play, particularly dramatic or pretend play in the development of perspective-taking. Rubin and Mioni (1975) found in an observational study of preschool children that the frequency of dramatic play was positively correlated to role-taking tasks measuring the ability to take a visual perspective of another.

Burns and Brainerd (1979) used two play conditions, constructive and dramatic, to examine the effect of play training on three classes of perspective-taking -- perceptual, cognitive, and affective -- with preschool subjects. Constructive play training involved building specific objects collaboratively, and dramatic play consisted of role-playing characters in thematic situation. Two measures were used to assess cognitive perspective-taking: matching gifts to people and a communication task requiring children to explain a story to a fictitious

partner and anticipate their verbal responses. Two emotional matching tasks were used. Results indicated that both play conditions resulted in significant and :roughly equivalent: gains in all three of perspective-taking.

Rosen (1974) studied the effect of training groups of low SES preschoolers in dramatic play. The dependent variables were a measure of visual perspective-taking and a cognitive-taking task that involved matching of visual objects to persons. Differences favoring trained groups over controls were found on these two measures, as well as a measure of cooperation.

The research reviewed above has shown that training in group dramatic play can result in gains in social skills and perspective-taking. However, there is some controversy over which aspect or component of the play is primarily responsible for these gains in social development. There are several possibilities:

1. the play itself -- object and role transformations that occur in play may hasten the decentration process.

2. adult instruction -- the adult-child interaction that occurs during the training may directly or indirectly teach the child new skills.

3. peer-interaction -- the conflicts among children that occur in sociodramatic play may cause cognitive imbalance resulting in new learning.

Because peer interaction and conflict are integral parts of group dramatic play, their effects are difficult if not impossible to separate from those of other aspects of play. It may be best to think of play training as a context in which make-believe role enactment, peer conflicts, and adult instruction all combine to promote children's social development.

Although there has been much research on the relationship between

sociodramatic play and social development of the child, some researchers suggest that other forms of play such as block play has the potential to foster social development by promoting positive social exchanges between young children. Rogers (1985) found that kindergarten children playing with both large hollow and unit blocks exhibited much high incidences of positive social behavior than negative social behavior. These children in the study seldom threatened, hit, or threw blocks at another child. There was almost no crying or screaming and they never engaged in physical fights. As Yarrow and Waxler (1976) indicated, blocks may provide a great opportunity for a child to behave in a prosocial or altruistic fashion.

Along with the probability of positive social interaction occurring during block play, kinsman and Berk (1979) emphasized that the block area also has the flexibility to meet "a variety of children's needs from retreat, withdrawal, and absorption in private activity to active group participation and cooperative efforts of other children". It appears that block play allows children the choice of which level of social participation they wish to engage in while simultaneously encouraging cooperative or group play.

Forman and Hill (1980) endorsed the use of block play to promote social development. They believed a child's relationship to the physical world may help that child make "more accurate judgments about the social world". In addition, block play often puts children in many "forced cooperation" situations in which they must either share some of the blocks and build together or forfeit constructing the grandiose structure they had planned to build. They learn to share out of necessity and self-interest, but in the process gain an understanding of how sharing and cooperation can be beneficial to others and to themselves.

In summary, it is clear that the role of play in children's social

development is never easy. There are still lots of questions to be answered and more future studies from various perspective are needed. We should know clearly what play is, how play is different from other types of behavior. We should make clear about the impact of social interaction that occurs in play, and should be able to untangle the separate contributions of each component of play training. Future, more studies should give attention to the permanency of training effects. Longitudinal or cohort research designs should be employed to monitor the effects of play experiences on children's development over longer period of time.

Implications for Early Childhood Education

As discussed above, play contributes to the social development of young children. As parents, or teachers, we can best use play to promote children's social development. Children should be encouraged to engage in social play through a conducive environment and by play tutoring if needed.

Providing a conducive environment for group play involves several factors. First, at least one other playmate must be available. Research indicates that familiar playmates and those of the same age tend to elicit high levels of group dramatic play than unfamiliar or different-age children. Second, there needs to adequate space for several children to play together. Third, adequate time needs to be provided. It takes a considerable amount of time to organize and plan a group dramatization or a group construction project. If play periods are too short and group play episodes are consistently nipped in the bud, children may eventually give up trying to engage in these important types of play. Finally, certain materials, such as dress-up clothes, dolls, housekeeping props, and blocks, tend to encourage social play. Be sure to make many of these high-social-value materials available for children.

Play tutoring can also be used to promote social play. With outside

intervention, the adult can make comments and suggestions that will lead children to play together. Inside interventions can also be used to foster group play. The parent or teacher can take on a role and, while enacting this role, try to get several children involved in social play.

If provision and adult involvement are successful and the children begin to engage in group play, the play itself should help the child acquire social skills and social knowledge and become a functioning member of the society.

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